Portraiture in Florence, Italy, in the Later 1400s

This room displays portraits painted in Florence, an international artistic and financial center, in the last half of the fifteenth century. During this period of the Renaissance, with its "rebirth" of interest in nature, Florentine painters like Castagno and Botticelli experimented with compositions not merely to capture the sitters' physical appearances but also to express their inner personalities. Leonardo da Vinci, Florence's most famous genius in the arts and sciences, strove to reveal what he called "the motions of the mind."

Leonardo da Vinci
Florentine, 1452-1519
Ginevra de' Benci, about 1474

Wood, 0.388 x 0.367 m (15 1/4 x 14 1/2 in.)
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1967.6.1.a-b

One of the few surviving paintings by Leonardo da Vinci and the only one in America, this portrait represents a young Florentine named Ginevra de' Benci. Completed either at the time of her marriage in 1474 or soon thereafter, the portrait unmistakably displays Leonardo's early style. This can be seen in the restricted palette, the sharply delineated curls of hair, the delicate modeling of the face, and the atmospheric landscape.

Ginevra sits before a juniper bush, an emblem that seems to refer to her virtue as well as to her identity. As a personal symbolic device, this evergreen forms a pun on the sound of her name. The Italian word for juniper, *ginepro*, is pronounced much like "Ginevra."

Contemporaries praised Ginevra for both her piety and her intellect. The church steeples seen in the distance here may signify her religious spirit. Of her acclaimed poetry, only one line is known today: "I ask your forgiveness; I am a mountain tiger." Leonardo's portrayal, with its level chin and direct gaze, conveys her disciplined, calm demeanor.

According to Renaissance fashion, her eyebrows and hairline have been plucked to create a smoothly domed forehead. Her marriage, at sixteen, was to a widower twice her age. When Leonardo painted Ginevra de' Benci's portrait, he was only in his early to mid-twenties himself.

The young Leonardo had apprenticed to Andrea del Verrocchio, a Florentine goldsmith, sculptor, and painter. Even though Leonardo already had become an independent master in the Florentine artists' guild, he still lived in Verrocchio's home. Leonardo's precocious talents are evident in his masterful blending of oil paints, creating the watery reflections in the pond and the translucency of the sheer fabric in Ginevra's bodice.

On the back side of the same wooden panel is a still-life painting by Leonardo that functions as an emblematic "portrait" of the sitter depicted on the front. A sprig of juniper, recalling Ginevra, is displayed before a simulated slab of porphyry stone. The surrounding branches allude to her moral character and poetic accomplishments. The palm symbolizes Christian piety, while laurel is the wreath of Apollo, classical god of learning. A scroll bears a Latin inscription—VIRTUTEM FORMA DECORAT—which means: "Beauty adorns virtue."

At some time in its past, the wooden panel was cut down, presumably to remove a damaged area along its lower edge. The front of the panel may originally have included Ginevra's hands. The British Royal Collection has a drawing by Leonardo that shows a woman's hands cupping a juniper sprig, which might have been a preparatory design for the portrait's now-missing bottom portion.

The red wax seal on the panel's reverse was affixed in 1733 by a prince of Liechtenstein. Since the Benci family had died out in 1611, the portrait may have entered the collection of that tiny principality in the early seventeenth century. The National Gallery acquired it from Liechtenstein in 1967, as the only double-sided panel by Leonardo and his only painting outside Europe.

The tiny Madonna and Child with a Pomegranate *in Gallery 7 is from the workshop of Andrea del Verrocchio, possibly in collaboration with the young Leonardo da Vinci. Verrocchio's sculpture is displayed in Gallery 9.*

Andrea del Castagno
Florentine, 1417/1419-1457
Portrait of a Man, about 1450

Wood, 0.540 x 0.405 m (21 1/4 x 15 7/8 in.)
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.17

Castagno's forceful portraiture clearly expresses the Early Renaissance interest in the physical appearance of an individual. The waist-length figure, with one hand visible, is highly unusual for Italian portraiture of this time. One of the earliest surviving Italian likenesses in which the sitter turns his head three-quarters toward the viewer, Castagno's design—with the body truncated just below the chest—may reveal an influence from ancient Roman carved portrait busts.

A quarter-century older than the other portraits in this room, Andrea del Castagno's painting has a strongly sculptural quality due to the abrupt contrasts of light and shade in its modeling. Noteworthy in creating a sense of three-dimensional projection into space is the sharp, reflected glow that accentuates the jaw line. The later portraits here use softer, more atmospheric transitions from pale to dark tones.

Castagno's vigorous approach may also be seen in the dynamism of his parade shield, The Youthful David, *in Gallery 4.*

Botticelli
Florentine, 1444/1445-1510
Portrait of a Young Man Holding a Medallion, about 1480–1485

Wood, 0.587 x 0.397 m (23 1/8 x 15 5/8 in.)
Lent from a Private Collection

This elegant youth quietly displays a circular medallion for the viewer's inspection. The so-called medallion is actually a fragment cut from a religious picture of the mid-1300s that shows a saint raising his hand in blessing. Botticelli physically set this older piece into his painting. The medieval figure, almost certainly the name saint of the young man, cannot now be identified; so, the sitter remains unknown.

The subject's graceful silhouette, occupying a clearly articulated space between a parapet and a window, characterizes Botticelli's renowned use of flowing contours. Botticelli, who was early influenced by Andrea del Verrocchio, began as an assistant to Fra Filippo Lippi.

Botticelli's religious subjects are in the adjoining Gallery 7, as are two more of his portraits, including Giuliano de' Medici.

Filippino Lippi
Florentine, c. 1457-1504
Portrait of a Youth, about 1485

Wood, 0.510 x 0.355 m (20 x 13 7/8 in.)
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.20

The working methods of Renaissance painters are evident here in the lines incised into the preparatory plaster coating. A full-size preliminary drawing for this portrait was placed over the panel while its final layer of gesso was still damp, and the contours were scratched through the paper. These guidelines, especially around the window edges, can be more easily seen by viewing the portrait from an angle. Careful inspection of the blue sky on either side of the red cap reveals a rejected design for another window.

Filippino permitted nothing to detract from this straightforward likeness. Handsome and at the same time full of integrity, the sitter is the quintessential image of the Florentine ideal of manhood. Filippino Lippi, after the death of his father, Fra Filippo Lippi, studied with Botticelli, who had earlier been Fra Filippo's pupil.

Religious subjects by Filippino Lippi are in the adjoining Gallery 7; his father's paintings are in Gallery 4.

Master of Santo Spirito
Florentine, active early 16th century
Portrait of a Youth, about 1505

Transferred from wood to canvas and novaply, 0.516 x 0.340 m (20 3/8 x 13 3/8 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.294

This unidentified painter is named for three altarpieces he created for the Church of Santo Spirito in Florence. The fanciful castle in the background of this portrait resembles Netherlandish architecture, implying that the Florentine artist had a knowledge of paintings from the Low Countries.

The youth's overall posture and the picture's shape suggest the probable original appearance of Leonardo da Vinci's *Ginevra de' Benci*, before the lower portion of that portrait was cut off. By showing the youth's hands crossed, the Master of Santo Spirito undoubtedly was also inspired by Leonardo's celebrated portrayal of *Mona Lisa*, painted around 1503 (Louvre, Paris).

Renaissance Portraiture

A striking feature of the Renaissance was its **revival of the realistic portrait** as a major subject in European art. Throughout the Middle Ages, portraits had been confined almost entirely to stylized figures of praying donors, depicted kneeling in the religious images that they had commissioned. Medieval donors may be seen in paintings by Bernardo Daddi (Gallery 1), Lippo Memmi and Andrea di Bartolo (Gallery 3), and in a carved bas-relief by Tino di Camaino (Gallery 2).

The Renaissance interest in humanity's relationship to the natural environment gave rise to likenesses of individuals in the real world—independent from any symbolic roles in church or state. **Classical prototypes for portrait formats** were found in the carved marble busts from Roman antiquity and the profile likenesses on ancient coins.

Earlier in the 1400s Italian patrons and artists had preferred the profile format for portraits, as may be seen in Gallery 4. But during this later period such strictly side views came to be replaced in Italy by **three-quarter views**, in which the sitter makes eye contact with the viewer. This emphasis on personal interaction was borrowed from portraits by Netherlandish masters in what is essentially modern-day Holland and Belgium. The cultural contacts between Italy and the Netherlands depended upon mutual banking and commerce; Italian businessmen who worked in the Low Countries would return home with northern European portraits, and vice versa.

A pair of paintings in Gallery 39 gives interesting proof of this cross-cultural exchange. Executed by Petrus Christus around 1455 in Bruges, a city in present-day Belgium, the *Portrait of a Male Donor* and *Portrait of a Female Donor* include coats of arms that identify the couple as being Italians from Genoa.

There was also a fruitful interchange of **painting techniques**. Earlier Italian pictures were almost exclusively rendered in egg tempera, applied to wooden panels coated with a fine white plaster called gesso. The natural glues in egg bonded the brilliantly colored pigments to the gesso. By the later decades of the 1400s, however, oil painting had been introduced from the Netherlands. Most of the pictures in this gallery are egg tempera, often completed with final coats of tinted oil, resin, or varnish. Some, such as the Leonardo da Vinci panel, make extensive use of the new, more atmospheric oil medium.

Florence, being a republic with an elected government, differed markedly in its social customs from those European political centers that were ruled by royal courts. As may be seen by the **simple clothing** depicted in these portraits, for instance, Florentine citizens tended to restrict their attire to basic tones of red, brown, gray, or black—even though luxury textiles were a mainstay of their thriving economy. Florentine men, no matter how wealthy, donned the tunics and caps of middle-class merchants. In keeping with the city's taste for republican humility, even Florentine women rarely dressed in the rich brocades and damasks used by noblewomen in Italian duchies or principalities. The more ornate clothes characteristic of contemporary Italian cities appear in Neroccio de' Landi's *Portrait of a Lady* from Siena (the nearby Gallery 8).

The works of art illustrated in this leaflet normally hang in this gallery, but installations are subject to change.

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